

Saudi Arabia's Planned "Day of Rage"

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Brief Analysis

On Friday, March 11, groups advocating greater political freedom in Saudi Arabia plan to hold a "day of rage" in the kingdom, mimicking protests that have been sweeping through much of the rest of the Arab world. These demonstrations have been scheduled despite Riyadh's announcement last month of a \$36 billion subsidy package for the Saudi people, seen as an attempt to buy off dissenters and avoid the troubles experienced elsewhere in the region. The Saudi government does not allow demonstrations, however, and has been reminding the public of this prohibition. Any protests therefore face the prospect of confrontation with the police and security forces.

Advance Condemnation

On March 6, the kingdom's top religious authority -- the Council of Senior Scholars, also known as the Ulama -- issued a statement calling for unity, declaring that this concept is fundamental to Islam and strongly supported by the Prophet Muhammad. The Ulama also noted that Saudi Arabia is blessed with wise leadership, that the government is legitimate, and that the kingdom should never allow foreign notions to distort its Islamic identity or wreak havoc. They drove the latter point home by warning against anything that might cause sedition.

The next day, the government's unelected advisory body -- the Consultative Council, or Majlis al-Shura -- endorsed the Ulama's position and noted that Islamic law prohibits demonstrations in the kingdom. It instructed the public not to pay attention to "misleading calls for demonstrations, sit-ins, and marches" and warned against "deviant intellectual and partisan links." "Deviant" is Saudi code for al-Qaeda, while "partisan" usually refers to Saudi Shiites, who are suspected of treacherous links to their coreligionists in Iran. In addition, Majlis Speaker Sheikh Abdullah bin Muhammad Al al-Sheikh reminded citizens of the kingdom's "unique, open-door" approach to satisfying demands and settling grievances by "writing directly to the leadership or any official."

The same day, the Council of Ministers -- meeting under the chairmanship of King Abdullah, who is also the prime minister -- added its own endorsement. In a statement following the meeting, it noted the importance of the Ulama's views on "the events, disturbances, and seditions taking place in various parts of the world." It also "urged all [Saudis] to spare no effort to augment unity and to enhance harmony" and warned against "any action that contradicts" such efforts.

Opposition Demands

Two distinct threads of protest are likely to emerge on Friday. Sunnis are expected to demonstrate in Riyadh and other cities. At the same time, Shiites -- a national minority of around two million, but concentrated in the Eastern Province on the Persian Gulf coast -- are planning demonstrations complaining about their disadvantaged status in Saudi society.

Sunni dissenters themselves fall into two categories: those who want greater freedoms, and those who regard the royal family as illegitimate and unwilling to administer a sufficiently religious state. The latter are often perceived as being sympathetic to al-Qaeda. At present, however, the former are the most vocal. Inspired by political change in Egypt and Tunisia, they are calling on the House of Saud to be more accountable.

The senior Saudi princes are reportedly dismissive of the activists' validity, as well as their determination and ability to mount any form of mass protest. Indeed, some of the leading opponents, several of whom have written online petitions and set up Facebook pages calling for reform are reluctant to advocate street protests. Any Sunni protests could be further limited by poor publicity: the authorities have blocked relevant websites, and no news stories about the planned demonstrations are being broadcast on Saudi television or the satellite services of the Saudi-owned al-Arabiya network and the Arabic language service of the Qatar-based Aljazeera.

For their part, Saudi Shiites are demanding the release of prisoners being held without trial. One Shiite cleric, Sheikh Tawfiq al-Amer, was given his freedom on March 6 after being detained in February for advocating a constitutional monarchy, but others remain in jail.

Shiites are also demanding equal rights with other Saudis, including better access to jobs. Although acknowledging the improvements made since King Abdullah ascended to the throne in 2005, such as more freedom to practice their own religious rites, they still face restrictions on government employment. For example, there are no Shiite government ministers, and the Ulama consists entirely of Wahhabi scholars, who practice the rigid form of Sunni Islam that dominates the kingdom. Shiites are also barred from the military and security services.

Several Saudi Shiite demonstrations have already occurred in recent weeks, although YouTube videos suggest that the events were smaller than claimed by Shiite activists. The protesters held up signs reading, "The reform movement wants reforms" and "We want our prisoners free," among other slogans. This latter demand relates to nine Shiite prisoners who, activists say, have been held without trial for more than fourteen years. The prisoners were rounded up after the 1996 bombing of the U.S. military complex at al-Khobar, believed to have been carried out by Shiites from Lebanon, probably with Iranian encouragement. Nevertheless, some Saudi Shiite demonstrators appear anxious to avoid any association with Iran: as one placard put it, "We do not plan to overthrow the system."

Likely Outcome

Given that Saudi authorities have warned against any demonstrations and have secured religious legitimacy for this policy, Friday's day of rage will be seen as a major test of resolve for all parties -- the government, the Sunni opposition, and the Shiite opposition. Violent confrontation of some sort seems inevitable, particularly in the Shiite areas where previous protests have come up against riot police. The most recent large-scale protests in these areas occurred in 2009, when the local population reacted against police searches for firebrand Shiite preacher Nimr al-Nimr, who had suggested in a sermon that Shiites could one day seek a separate state.

Events in the Shiite areas will also be influenced by protests in nearby Bahrain, where the majority Shiite population is attempting to win political concessions from the Sunni ruling family. Last month's violent confrontations between Shiite demonstrators and the Bahraini army have given way to a fragile truce. In the event of further violence, however, Riyadh could well deploy specially trained units of the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) to support the Bahraini royal family. Such units are already stationed in the Saudi Eastern Province for potential deployment against

any perceived troublemaking by Saudi Shiites. Yet their value in peaceful crowd control may be limited. In 1987, during the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, SANG forces confronted Iranian pilgrims who shouted slogans in favor of the regime in Tehran, killing more than 300 and injuring around 500.

Oil Issues

World oil markets have already been affected by the shutdown in Libyan exports, and the potential for trouble in Saudi Arabia, the world's largest exporter, is making them even more jittery and causing upward pressure on prices. The Shiite town of Qatif, the site of previous demonstrations, is just a few miles from the main Ras Tanura oil terminal. Today, Saudi oil minister Ali Naimi gave an unusually long "special interview" to the official Saudi Press Agency seeking to assure international markets that there would be no oil shortages. Naimi is a well-respected oil professional who usually calms market anxiety via short, gnomish comments to foreign news agency specialists. That he has given a much longer explanation of the kingdom's current perspective might only increase such anxiety.

U.S. Policy

As the crises in the Arab world have multiplied, the rift between the Saudi and U.S. perspectives has become obvious. Riyadh supported former president Hosni Mubarak during the Egyptian revolution and has given asylum to former president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia. Although the government's determination to allow zero protests on Friday will be a crucial test of the wisdom of its tactics, the decision itself is in direct contradiction of U.S. policy regardless of the outcome. On March 7, State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said, "The United States supports a set of universal rights, including the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. Those rights must be respected everywhere, including Saudi Arabia." Therefore, anything that happens in the kingdom on March 11 will challenge the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

Simon Henderson, the Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute, is author of the 2009 Policy Focus [After King Abdullah: Succession in Saudi Arabia \(/templateC04.php?CID=315\)](/templateC04.php?CID=315). ❖

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